

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE WILLIAM J. PERRY
INTERVIEW WITH CATHERINE CRIER ON ABC-TV PROGRAM, "NIGHTLINE"
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CATHERINE CRIER: Tonight, does today's show of NATO peace, or merely drag the U.S. into another bloody war? We'll ask the Secretary of Defense.

Was it inevitable? After all, the war in Bosnia has been going on for 22 months -- nearly two years of reports describing systematic rapes, punishing detention camps, genocide -- and the West has not been silent. Each atrocity was met with expressions of outrage, clinched fists, and threats. But until today, the military strategy of the West, of NATO, of the United States, has been to sit and wait.

Which brings us to the question, why now? After all, it's been just a week since Russian peace-keeping troops replaced Serb heavy artillery in the mountains surrounding Sarajevo. And since that time, it's been a relatively quiet time in Bosnia. So, why did the Serbs test their luck now? And what's made today's wrong-doing worse than the hundreds that have come before it -- bad enough for America and NATO to retaliate?

For more on the story, here's ABC's Jackie Judd. (Video Segment)

MS. CRIER: And joining me now, Defense Secretary William Perry.

Welcome, Mr. Secretary.

Why, after 22 months of this conflict -- almost a year of the no-fly-zone resolution -- did NATO decide to show it meant business today?

SEC. PERRY: Because this was the first time that the Serbs brought their planes out and actually tried to bomb with them. This is the first time they had a clear violation with fighter aircraft, and, therefore, was the first real opportunity that NATO had to exercise its ultimatum.

MS. CRIER: But there have been numerous violations. Some say over 500, some put it in the 1,400 range, with particularly helicopters that U.N. sources have said have had failed bombing raids themselves.

SEC. PERRY: The helicopters are very different. They have had violations with helicopters. We call them. Our planes go out -- the NATO planes go out and demand that they land, and they do land. What was different this

time is that our NATO planes demanded that the GALEBs land, and they did not. And when they did not, we shot them down. This was the first time NATO had been presented with this kind of a challenge.

MS. CRIER: On that note, let's take a break and we'll be right back in just a moment with Secretary Perry.

MS. CRIER: And we're back with Defense Secretary William Perry.

Mr. Secretary, some say that NATO credibility was on the line.

SEC. PERRY: I think the NATO credibility was already demonstrated by its resolve to -- last April, already stating that they would attack any airplanes that violated the zone -- the no-fly- zone. They have simply demonstrated what they said at that time. There was never any question, in the minds of the NATO, that if they were challenged this way, that they would respond.

MS. CRIER: Any coincidence, in terms of timing, that the Russians bring in peace-keeping troops, that they encourage the Serbs to cooperate with the removal of artillery around Sarajevo, and then NATO steps in and takes an offensive action to defend that resolution?

SEC. PERRY: I don't know whether there's any coincidence on the part of the action by the Serbs, but there's no coincidence on NATO's part. This is the action we would have taken one month ago, four months ago, or six months ago, if the Serbs had performed this particular act.

MS. CRIER: What happens now? In retaliation, some say, there was the strike on Tuzla, around the airport, an action that might have called for NATO air strikes under some of the terms of the NATO resolutions.

SEC. PERRY: The air strikes could be called by the UNPROFOR forces on the ground -- the U.N. forces on the ground, if they were being attacked by Serb forces. They were not. This was shelling of Tuzla. The shelling was at about the same rate has been occurring for the last several months. So, there was no particularly unusual response to Tuzla today. It was

unfortunate, but the shelling was not different from what we have been seeing in the past.

MS. CRIER: With, at least, the immediate success around Sarajevo, is there any concern that the guns that are not turned over to U.N. control could simply be moved to other areas, such as Tuzla, for additional shelling?

SEC. PERRY: Yes, there is. And moving them is one thing, using them to shell Tuzla would be a very different thing. We have asked the Russians to advise the Serbs not to use these guns in the shelling of other cities. We have warned the Serbs that that would be a wrong tactic for them.

MS. CRIER: What happens if they do?

SEC. PERRY: Well, that depends on the circumstances. We -- the United Nations has already made a demand to open the Tuzla airport on March the 7th. They are moving more ground troops in to do that. The particular response will depend on the particular challenge that we have -- whether it can be met by ground troops, which would be U.N. forces, or air power, which would be NATO, or some combination of the above. But the NATO air power would be used in Tuzla, under present resolutions, only if the United Nations forces on the ground are under attack and call for close air support.

MS. CRIER: But, in fact, there has been a call to open that airport. There is a specific date. If it is not opened due to Serb activity, does that call for either air strikes or ground troop activity?

SEC. PERRY: No, the United Nations resolution and the NATO resolutions do not go that far. They allow -- they call for NATO to support the United Nations ground troops only if they ask for close air support. We have no mandate to use the air power to open an airport. And it is not at all clear that our air power is capable of doing that. To force the opening of that airport would require ground troops, and a substantial number of ground troops. This is not an appropriate task for air power.

MS. CRIER: Is the United States prepared to support a large number of ground troop forces in there, to open that airport?

SEC. PERRY: The NATO has a --

already has an agreement that they will supply, they will support the ground forces -- the U.N. ground forces -- if the forces come under attack and if they call for help. That is the extent of the commitment at this time.

MS. CRIER: So, only if they come under attack?

SEC. PERRY: Only if they come under attack and call -- and call for close air support. This is a separate resolution that the resolution which affected Sarajevo.

MS. CRIER: What about the extension of that resolution protecting Sarajevo? If there seems to be a success, in terms of the cessation of the shelling -- there are at least five other safe zones as designated around the area that could call for this kind of action -- are you prepared to support the extension of the resolution to other areas?

SEC. PERRY: We'd have to look at each of those in a case by case basis. But I can tell you the test we will use in each case that we looked at. The first is any proposed action -- any proposed air power action has to be -- has to arguably advance the cause of peace, the peace negotiations that are going on, not retard it. Secondly, it has to demonstrably reduce civilian casualties. And third, and most importantly from a practical point of view, it has to be an action which can be affected by NATO air power plus the existing U.N. ground forces.

NATO is only involved directly in this with its air power. And if you look at these other safe areas, as they're called, most of them do not involve heavy artillery shelling into the city. They involve hand-to-hand fighting in the city or infantry actions, for which air power would not be a useful vehicle. So, the situations in the other cities are very different from Sarajevo, and it would be a mistake to simply, automatically assume that we can extend what we did in Sarajevo to other cities.

MS. CRIER: Well, that's something that President Clinton has said that he would not be prepared to support that activity, if it wasn't something that NATO could achieve. Do you feel that NATO is presently incapable of moving into those areas and extending that peace-keeping

effort?

SEC. PERRY: It's not, Catherine, that NATO is incapable. It is that some of these military tasks that we're talking about are not appropriate for air power. And the only power that NATO is projecting, at this stage, is air power. NATO has no plans to bring ground troops into the Bosnia area.

MS. CRIER: So what about the peace-keeping hopes that you have, based upon the action today?

SEC. PERRY: I don't see this action as materially affecting the peace-keeping negotiations -- the diplomatic efforts -- substantially one way or the other. There is perhaps a small plus in that it indicated clearly that NATO has resolve and has capability.

But the issues affecting the success of the negotiations are really quite different than what we see -- than are affected by these relatively small military actions we're seeing. They have to do with the fundamental disputes, the fundamental disagreements among the warring parties. I believe we are making progress in the peace negotiations. But I believe that progress is not really primarily dependent on military action such as the one we saw today.

MS. CRIER: On a very short term basis, though, are you concerned about further retaliation, possible escalation of the violence, based upon the downing of those four planes?

SEC. PERRY: One has to always be concerned about that, but I'm even more fundamentally concerned about what would happen if we did not stop. All we would have to do is go back to the winter of '93 and the last half of '92, before the no-fly-zone was created, and then there were civilians being killed every day by the aerial bombardment of the towns and villages. That has stopped. From April '93 on, there has been no bombardment of any cities in Bosnia -- aerial bombardment -- until today. And that's why this event -- the NATO reaction today -- was so appropriate. It has stopped the bombardment now since last April, for ten months. Now, when it started again today, the airplanes immediately went out to attack the Serb bombers who were doing the damage.

MS. CRIER: We'll talk about long-term peace objectives. We'll be back in a moment.

(Announcements.)

MS. CRIER: And I'm back now with Defense Secretary William Perry.

Mr. Secretary, was there any quid pro quo by the United States in exchange for an allied agreement to support the air strike around Sarajevo if the weapons weren't removed?

SEC. PERRY: No.

MS. CRIER: None whatsoever?

SEC. PERRY: None whatsoever.

MS. CRIER: Is there any pressure that the U.S. is expected to bring to bear on the Muslims, for example, to either come in and unite with the Croats or to go forward with long-term suggestions about negotiated peace?

SEC. PERRY: There are two separate issues here, Catherine. The first issue is what the United States can and should do to accelerate the peace process. We have discussed this with our allies. They have encouraged us to put more effort in that area -- and, indeed, we are. And I will talk more about that, if you would like.

But the other, which is very different, is what can we do to limit the casualties, to limit the violence while the peace talk is going on. We already had instituted the no-fly-zone, which stops aerial bombardment of cities, but we were seeing thousands of people being killed in Sarajevo while the peace talks were going on. And so, the ultimatum -- the NATO ultimatum to stop the shelling of Sarajevo was simply designed to do that -- to limit civilian casualties while the peace talks proceeded.

MS. CRIER: Then, with that rationale, there shouldn't be any reason to prevent that policy from being expanded around Bosnia.

SEC. PERRY: There's no theoretical reason, but the NATO and the United States both do not believe in making threats which they are incapable of carrying out. The threats which we made in Sarajevo could be carried out with air power. If we'd go to some of the other safe areas around Bosnia, where there's hand-to-hand fighting in urban areas going on, air power would not be a useful tool to use. And so,

therefore, NATO would be not inclined to make the same kind of a threat in those areas.

MS. CRIER: Is there any concern at all about the increased role that the Russians are having and their acknowledgement of the so-called alliance -- traditional alliance with the Serbs?

SEC. PERRY: Well, the Russians have their own interests in this area, but at least one of their interests coincides with our interest -- and that is the interest to get the fighting stopped and to protect the civilians while the negotiations are going on. We called upon the Russians to use their influence with the Serbs to accept the ultimatum in Sarajevo and pull their artillery shells out. We don't know what was said between the Russians and the Bosnian Serbs, but we believe that might have been influential. So we welcomed that initiative to the extent the Russians took it.

MS. CRIER: Looking at U.S. decision-making, in terms of the policy in Bosnia, the American people saw the famine in Somalia, saw the strife in the civil war, understood -- many -- why we went in there. They see the same things coming out of Bosnia, and yet there has been tremendous inaction on the part of the United States, on the part of NATO, up until today. When do you decide that this is a militarily significant circumstance to intervene or it's time to move in in this fashion? Help us understand that distinction.

SEC. PERRY: First of all, I'd like to challenge the inaction. We have had underway, for a year now, one of the largest airlift and airdrops humanitarian aid programs in history. And that has saved tens of thousands of lives in Bosnia.

MS. CRIER: Military intervention.

SEC. PERRY: The military intervention -- we have been very clear that we are using military intervention in only one way, and that is, as part of NATO and as part of the use of NATO air power when it can be used to limit the civilian violence, the casualties to civilians that's going on. That's the only are in which we have agreed to use our military power. And that, in conjunction with NATO, that applies in practice to three different areas -- to the air strikes around Sarajevo, to enforcing the no-fly-zone, which we saw an example of today, and the third area is if the U.N. forces on the ground call for NATO air support, we would participate in that as well. Those are the three areas where we have promised to supply military power. And every time that it's been asked of us, we have done it.

MS. CRIER: Well, Mr. Secretary, thank you very much for coming in this evening and shedding some light on the events of today.

SEC. PERRY: Thank you, Catherine.